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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study of the content of the lyrics of 100 country-western songs. It presents findings concerning the primary subject matter of the songs, female and male roles portrayed, and the value system implicit in the song lyrics. Among the findings were that the single most-valued subject in country-western music is romantic love; that, in lieu of achieving the romantic ideal, the individual depicted in country-western music has little to hope for or aspire to; and that the figure in country-western music has little control over the circumstances of his or her life. (GW)

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# FASTER HORSES...
# AN ANALYSIS OF COUNTRY-WESTERN MUSIC

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This paper is an analysis of the latent transactional content of a sample of country and western music. The sample used was 100 songs played during six broadcast hours on station KERE in Boulder, Colorado from March 18 to April 4. KERE was chosen as it reportedly played fewer popular folk-rock selections than other CW stations. The investigator attempted to describe the value system implicit in the song lyrics.

Steve Goodman, a current folk-rock songwriter stated that the only elements needed to create CW lyrics were "prison, truck, mama, train and farm." The closing verse of his satirical version of the typical country-western song was:

> Since Mama went to prison
> Things on the farm ain't been the same,
> But when they let her out last Tuesday
> She drove her pick-up truck into a train.

Although "farm" prison" and "mama" were mentioned only once, "truck" twice, and "train" three times in the investigator's sample, Goodman's analysis remains relatively accurate. These elements tend to represent categories in the CW picture of reality. Since country-western music was rural in origin, the farm and, often, the prison were locale experienced by both the singer and the listener. Now, urbanized, the music's common setting is a bar. Similarly, a once family-bound rural working society revered the loving, understanding matriarch; now, mobile and cut-off from family ties, the CW society idealizes the loving, understanding wife. Finally, the "truck and train," symbols of travel and freedom, have been somewhat replaced in a jet age by the airplane--mentioned more frequently than any other vehicle in the investigator's sample. Thus using these updated categories, one can still describe what country-western music is all about.

Primary Subject Matter

| Subject | Number of Songs |
|---|---|
| 1. Unsatisfactory Romantic Love | 37 |
| 2. Satisfactory Romantic Love | 15 |

| | |
|---|---|
| 3. Potential Romantic Love | 12 |
| 4. Travel | 12 |
| 5. Bars/Drinking | 10 |
| 6. CW Music | 6 |
| 7. Values | 5 |
| 8. Cowboys | 5 |
| 9. Childhood | 3 |
| 10. Trucking | 2 |
| 11. Illness/Death | 1 |
| 12. Prison | 1 |
| 13. War | 1 |
| 14. Religion | 1 |

(The total is not a perfect 100 as several songs had duel subject matter.)

Female Roles

| Role | Number of Songs |
|---|---|
| 1. Faithless Lover/Wife | 23 |
| 2. Loving Partner | 15 |
| 3. Betrayed or Jilted Lover/Wife | 14 |
| 4. Bait/Potential Lover | 12 |
| 5. Barroom Queen | 4 |
| 6. Mother | 3 |

Male Roles

| Role | Number of Songs |
|---|---|
| 1. Betrayed or Jilted Lover/Husband | 23 |
| 2. Faithless Lover/Husband | 15 |
| 3. Loving Partner | 14 |
| 4. Drinking Man | 14 |
| 5. Guitar Player | 6 |

| | |
|---|---|
| 6. Cowboy | 5 |
| 7. Trucker | 2 |
| 8. Miner | 1 |
| 9. Milkman | 1 |
| 10. Alligator Wrestler | 1 |
| 11. Poet | 1 |
| 12. Prisoner | 1 |

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As the tables reveal, the single most valued subject in country-western music is romantic love. Of 100 songs, 64 concerned some form of romantic love. The closest second was travel, yet the traveler was frequently leaving a lover behind: "You say you're gonna' leave, gonna' take that big white bird." Similarly, the third most popular subject, bars and drinking, generally served as an escape from sadness over the loss of a lover: "I'm drinking my baby off my mind."

The female seems to be the pivotal partner in the love relationship as the romantic ideal is a "good-hearted woman" who supplies sex and sympathy for her "good-timing man." Such a relationship provides the only real happiness in life, yet it is often unattainable. Thirty-seven of the 64 love songs described unhappy couples, 20 as a result of betrayal ("Someone's with your wife tonight, Mister."); 17 as cases of unrequited love ("Love can't be explained, it can't be controlled./ One day it's warm, next day it's cold.").

Sexual satisfaction appears to be a primary factor in keeping lovers together as several songs emphasize "what goes on behind closed doors," "with the shades pulled down," and "when the sun

goes down." "Two nights in a motel in Dallas" is what made one couple fall in love. Women are encouraged to give their men ample "sweet, sweet lovin'" to keep them away from "Superskirts," and girls win their suitors with promises of "I got what you need." Jesse Coulter sings about the single girl's dream of a man who decides to stay after spending the night. The female is under constant pressure to uphold her end of the sexual bargain, while the male's sexuality is assumed.

A second factor in creating conjugal bliss is also the woman's responsibility. Fifteen songs celebrated some form of achieved romantic happiness, frequently long-term marriage as the result of a wife who is "always there." "She loves hm in spite of his wicked ways that she don't understand." "You know just what I need just when I need it," her partner remarks. She asks, "Let me be there in your morning,/Let me be there in your night./ Let me take whatever's wrong and make it right." The male, however, is not expected to be completely faithful and loving, else the love which is his "fortress" becomes a "prison." He must know how to make love, "grabbin' all the girls he can;" fight, "If I had a backbone, she wouldn't be gone;" and drink, "I'm a honky-tonk barroom man." The macho male 's somewhat sadistic role in the love relationship is dealt with directly in one song where the metaphor of a battlefield is used to describe a bedroom argument. Ultimately the cold and angry husband is defeated by his wife's tears and softness, her only legitimate weapons. She is "wounded and heartbroken, scarred by the killing words he said."

Both males and females are guilty of infidelity, though the female was faithless in 23 songs and the male in only 14. This difference is possibly the result of an overwhelming number of male CW singers in the sample used; 67 of the 100 songs were sung by males.

In lieu of achieving the romantic ideal, the individual depicted in country-western songs has little to hope for or aspire to; therefore, most of the music is melancholy and nostalgic. People are preoccupied with memories of the past and the feelings they arouse: going home or wanting to, "I can almost see Houston from here;" recalling a happier youth, "The roots of my raisin' run deep;" recalling a better town, "Abilene, prettiest town I've ever seen;" or remembering an old love affair, "My eyes can only see as far as you." In fact, there appears to be a kind of stoic heroism in continuing to love someone who no longer loves you, "The one I love forever is untrue." Country-western music concerns the young adult or middle-aged working-class person whose early dreams have collided with an unfulfilling reality. Thus, the painful present is often drowned in alcohol, "Liquor makes my sun come up again," or sad feelings are wallowed in, "I love to hear that hurtin' music when I'm hurtin' too." Since life is suffering, misery itself is valued.

The future is no brighter, as the individual in CW music moves on but doesn't go anywhere. The means for controlling the environment and achieving self-actualization valued in the middle and upper classes--education, wealth, power-- are either totally absent

or rejected. A poet takes the advice of a rambling cowboy, passes it on to his own son, and gives up writing, and a typical hero "never made it to class." Women who marry for money are unhappy, and the world of wealth and culture is presented as shallow and pretentious: "Don't let the green grass fool you." "A violin is just a fiddle in other hands." The only desirable occupations mentioned for men are the guitar player who sings the blues, the cowboy of the old West who escapes modern society, or the trucker who keeps moving, a luxury denied most of the working class. Cars ("smooth-running, breath-taking, loving machine"), trucks ("Honeysuckle Role, the woman I love"), trains ("hear that lonesome whistle blow"), and planes ("silver wings") are glamourized apparently as a result of this desire to go somewhere else where life is perhaps better. Sexual overtones of the vehicle descriptions imply that cars, etc., like women, should spirit one away from harsh realities. The man who can't make it with a woman, a guitar, a six-gun, or ride into the sunset is left with a bottle in a bar picking up girls who "all look prettier at closing time."

Women's roles are even more limited; it's either the happy wife or the barroom queen, "fallen angels of the backstreet bars," who also need companions to help them "make it through the night."

The figure in CW music is remarkably helpless as s/he suffers almost continuously and has no control over the circumstances which create unhappiness; "I just can't make it any longer/ Everything I do is wrong." Faced with an unpleasant world, it is little wonder that moral weakness is common, expected, usually forgiven, and at times encouraged. There is nothing to achieve, struggle for,

which will improve life except the affection of a lover who accepts one without qualification. "I love you most of all because you're you." As the cowboy summed it up for the poet seeking the true values in life, the only things worth pursuing are "Faster horses, older whiskey, younger women, and more money." Faster horses--the means to travel to a better place and a symbol of masculinity; older whiskey--escape and good times; younger women--sexual satisfaction if not romance; more money--not for personal betterment but to buy temporary pleasure. The values are blatantly male-centered and concern what may be found in the external world rather than in one's own personal development.

It is not unusual that many country-western songs are about the music itself, "Hank Williams, you wrote my life." The music, like the whiskey or sex, offers solace to the "aching heart," yet it also serves as the only creative personal comment which the individual can make on his/her world. The music, however, aids in creating a perspective in which suffering itself is highly valued. Pain is necessary to confirm life, and it is the one experience to be counted on in an unpredictable world. The CW listener is encouraged to assume the passive role of victim rather than that of actor, master of one's fate. Ambition, worldly knowledge, material achievement, and power are the rejected evils of the Pharisees; therefore, mature avenues of meaning are eliminated. The loss of youthful pleasures is the loss of life. Sexual melodrama and vapid emotionalism are mistaken for love, commitment, patience and courage. Country-western music may well reinforce a

fatalistic attitude toward one's life, a reverence for emotionalism, a preoccupation with the past, a distorted view of human love, and a definite sexist bias. This study suggests further investigation of how other forms of modern media serve to impress upon the consumer that s/he is powerless, that meaning and happiness rests in objects and youthful pleasures rather than within the individual him/herself.